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AUTHOR Moore, Bryan L.
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ABSTRACT

For the author, becoming an English instructor places him on the horns of a dilemma: how may those who have identified themselves as students in the past begin to identify themselves as professional peers? Is it an attitude that comes naturally through writing term papers; reading the scholarship of the field; contributing to participating conferences; trying to publish; working through and appropriating other rhetoric? In short, is professionalism merely a designation or is it an attitude? Some of the basic concepts of composition and rhetorical theory can be put to use in entertaining the question. Consider the question of audience when applying for a job: parttime or fulltime? Naturally, the applicant wants to learn as much as possible about his or her potential employer and wants to conduct him- or herself in a manner that will seem attractive to the employer. From poststructuralist rhetoric, the new professional can learn to problematize the virgule between student and teacher. The teaching professional may always want to be a student of sorts, a person who continues learning indefinitely, not only through professional activity but also through interaction with students. (Contains 20 references.) (TB)

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Bryan L. Moore
Texas Christian University

ED 402 579

Professing Professionalism: The Psychological Dilemma of the Student-to-Professional Peer Conversion Process

I am probably the least qualified person in the world to speak on being a professional. I didn't include that idea on my abstract for this session, of course. But I am quite qualified, I think, to speak about *not* being a professional. I have been a non-professional for my whole life. But now I am on the horns of a dilemma upon which many graduate English students are required to sit in preparing to enter the work place, the real world: how may those who have identified themselves as students over the past several years *begin* to identify themselves as professional peers? Is it an attitude that comes naturally through writing term papers, reading the scholarship of the field, contributing to participating in conferences, trying to publish, coming to know one's own aptitudes, interests, drives, expectations, working through the dialectics of and appropriating other rhetorics? Of course all these things are vastly important, but they don't constitute professionalism. At TCU I have received as good a preparation for the profession as any other graduate program I have heard of--and Rachelle Smith has just described some of the hands-on preparation that TCU students may experience. Though students may, through class work, conference participation, publishing, and other academic activities, come to feel intellectually prepared for professional status as scholars, this conversion process is often fraught with psychological uncertainty. And so the questions remain: Is professionalism merely a designation or is it an attitude? What does it mean to be a professional?

When I confront these questions, I know that I have *enjoyed* being a student. Occasionally I feel like Bartleby, preferring not to participate, or in coming to terms with the

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impossibility of knowing beforehand how to bridge the psychological gap between student and professional attitudes (as the title of this paper is called), sometimes I wonder if I am not in fact on the Bridge of Sighs, being conveyed from the judgment hall to the place of execution. Perhaps these thoughts have something to do with the nature of INTPs--introverted, intuitive, thinking perceivers. But I know I'm not alone. I see that my fellow job seekers are, too, anxious and uncertain, and more than likely also lying awake at 3:00 a.m. wondering if they forgot to run a spell check on the letter of application that went out twelve hours earlier. In a recent editorial in the Chronicle (3/8/96: B3a), Patrick Sullivan writes, "I worked so hard for so long on my Ph.D . . . . that after a while I lost touch with everything that might be considered human."

As a doctoral candidate in composition and rhetoric who is presently situated on the horns of the student-to-peer conversion process, I do not propose a "master solution"; rather, I suggest that, for student-scholars positioned to embark on professional careers as teachers of communication, this conversion process presents the potentially rewarding invitation to put into practice some of the basic concepts that are central to composition and rhetorical theory. We are trained in a logic that might state "I will not accept a position that does not offer tenure, University X does not offer tenure to its faculty, I will not accept an offer from University X." But we are also trained in a dialectic of considering a position for which we are being considered that somehow falls below one's expectations.

It is most difficult to understand one's audience. It helps, of course, in the pre-interviewing process, to learn as much as you can about specific institutions through Peterson's guides, from looking at school catalogues and other publications, and word of mouth--when that is an option. (I've included a bibliography on my subject which is far from exhaustive. I'm sure

I've left out some key texts--but these are articles and books somehow devoted to my topic that might be helpful. The best thing about the articles is that they tend to be very short.) During convention and at on-cite interviews, phone discussions with prospective employers, in letters of application and supporting materials I want to convey collegiality as well as the impression that I will be a person my colleagues will be able (if not happy) to see in halls, office rooms, meetings, lunches, at grocery stores for the next number of decades. Ethos, then, is important.

From poststructuralist rhetoric we can learn to problematize the virgule between student/teacher, though the distinction is always already put into question. It will not be my professional title--let me restate: I hope it will not always be my professional title--but I will always be a student-teacher. I intend to always act like it. This past summer I taught a sophomore composition class in which I employed an environmental theme. Our class was comprised of a refreshingly (un-TCU-like) cultural mix of students. These students were incredibly informative for both me and, I think, the class as a whole. Being myself a middle-class white and well-read in nature writing written almost exclusively by middle-class whites, it is ground breaking for me to learn that some people's idea of environmentalism has less to do with preserving, say, the U.S. wetlands than with a more immediate kind of survival. One interested student wrote a paper in which she describes her experiences in a remote part of the Phillippines, where its inhabitants live in utter poverty; she builds a convincing argument that these peoples' desperate state is in large part caused by the unethical and even illegal practices of a nearby chemical plant. An African-American student wrote about environmental racism, an attitude whereby large corporations build pollution-generating factories in minority areas because its inhabitants lack political clout. Other students took views opposing those in the readings. Taking

her cue from an editorial in our reader that criticizes the whaling practices of the Icelanders and Japanese, a Japanese student wrote a well-argued essay condoning the "cultivation" of some types of whales. These are things that I learned from my students, who might also be called student-teachers; I was their student as much as they were mine.

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